LITERATURE IN ESL: EMPOWERMENT OF A MULTIDIMENSIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The common practices of ESP and EAP in Freshman English contexts in Turkey seem to reflect 'the compartmentalized' teaching practices in the Turkish educational system and serve as a continuum of it where students are put in distinctive categories according social and science majors geared towards university entrance exam. In such a context where a holistic view to the language, language learning and education seems to be rare and the integration of literature in ESL contexts left to the teachers' discretion and personal efforts and mostly prevails to be limited to the courses pre-service teachers receive, Istanbul Sehir University Freshman English Program which aims at empowering an individual focus and interpretation to the language through the integration of literature in ESL (Brumfit and Carter 1986; Carter and McRae, 1996; Duff and Maley, 1990; Gilroy and Parkinson, 1997) implements solely literary texts; namely short stories and novels in a prerequisite and compulsory course 'Textual Analysis and Effective Communication' as a remedy to bridge the gap between the language as a ruled-based system and language as a socio-semantic system. In this session, the results of a qualitative study conducted with Freshman English students from various departments will be presented and the session will outline the students' perceptions on this unique 'Textual Analysis and Effective Communication' course and the noted learning outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Short and Candlin (1989, p.181) in their brief overview on how literature teaching to foreign students has transformed over this century, point out that due to their inaccessibility and difficulty to non-native speakers, the texts of high-caliber eventually disappeared from language teaching and were replaced by "surrogate literature" (*ibid.*). Since the early 1980s, the use of literature as a source in language learning contexts has been an ongoing debate and even though the advocates of the benefits of the integration of literature in ESL/EFL contexts have proposed solid grounds (Brumfit and Carter, 1986; Carter and McRae, 1996; Duff and Maley, 1990; Gilroy and Parkinson, 1997; Hall, 1989), in practice due to various concerns the integration of literature in ESL/EFL is still approached as an alien and impractical notion or is seen to fit to be an extracurricular activity. Even though the implementation of literary texts in ESL/EFL contexts serves as one of the multifaceted remedies to bridge the gap between the language as a ruled-based system and language as a socio-semantic system it hasn't received the deserved attention in Turkey. This gives way to the common approach that literary texts are either to be used as extensive reading in the form of 'readers' or as extra-curricular activities diminishing its worth and value in language education. In such a context, Freshman English Program at a foundation university in Istanbul has been implementing solely literary texts (novels and short stories) in one of the compulsory and prerequisite courses named "Textual Analysis and Effective Communication". This paper reveals the results of a qualitative study constructed with twelve Turkish Freshman students from various departments taking the course and outlines the students' perceptions on this unique 'Textual Analysis and Effective Communication' course and the noted learning outcomes.

THE PLACE OF LITERATURE IN ESL/EFL

Some of the prominent reasons put forth for re-installing literature in language teaching include authentic, non-trivial content (Brumfit, 1986, p.185; Carter and Walker, 1989, p. 6; Carter and Mccarty, 1995, p. 304; Widdowson 1983), stimulating source for discussions, interpretations and meaning construction (Carter and Mccarty, 1995, p. 304; Hall, 1989, p.34), 'different varieties of English' (Short and Candlin, 1989, p.181), universality, non-triviality, authenticity, interest, economy and suggestive power, ambiguity (Maley, 1989, p. 11-12), expansion of all language skills (Povey, 1972). Other benefits stated to have come out of the implementation of literary text in ESL/EFL contexts activating the techniques of contextualization (Gajdusek, 1988), looking for evidence in the process of making sense (Widdowson, 1983), development of the 'the fifth skill'; the skills of thinking in English (McRae, 1996, p. 17), initiating the construction of meaning through 'questioning' and 'making intelligent guesses' (Lazar, 1993, Parkinson and Reid, 2000).

Widdowson (1983) states a unique side of literature, which is not required when reading 'conventional discourse' that '… it is representative of a new reality' and one has to find evidence in the process of making sense. Thus the reader puts in a constant effort in deciphering the meaning putting the pieces together; in other words, literature is 'in the problem-setting business and the reader of literature is in the problem-solving business'. (Widdowson, 1983, p. 32). In the same vein, what is seen as the primary purpose in literature, which is involving the reader in direct experience rather than conveying information is believed to help the learner as a whole (Gajdusek, 1988, p. 229). Gajdusek's view is in line with the view McRae (1996) expounds when he puts forth the differentiating aspects of referential and representational texts, the latter under which he places 'literature'. He proposes that when a learner is engaged with literature, 'the rules are questioned, played around with, and put to different uses as part of that ongoing process of language acquisition' (p.17). This experience is seen to be fundamental in the process of language awareness because materials such as representational materials offer 'knowledge about language' and provides a platform for the 'necessity of imaginative engagement'. For McRae, this experience bridges the gap between target and native language and serves as a trigger to push the learner go beyond seeing the language as an application of rules (*ibid.*)

In an ESL setting the integration of literary texts serves as an authentic platform where language is acquired through the exposition to 'different varieties of English' (Short and Candlin, 1989, p.181). The meaningful context and non-trivial content (Carter and Walker, 1989, p. 6; Carter and McCarthy, 1995, p. 304; Widdowson, 1983; Brumfit1986, p.185) leads to stimulating interpretations and discussions where the learners construct meaning; what the text means (Carter and McCarthy 1995: 304; Hall 1989: 34). This is noteworthy, in a sense that it also helps promote individuals 'as a whole'.

Literature with a Small 'l'

"Literature with small 'l'" coined by McRae (1991) refers to a new approach to the integration of literature in language teaching which utilizes both literary texts and the texts including literary elements (McRae, 1991). This new approach of seeing literary texts and literary elements as a resource to enhance language learning rather than seeing them as fundamental pillars of 'canonicity' has brought about a shift in the use of literature in ESL/EFL contexts aiming to bring literature down from a pedestal. McRae differentiates texts into referential and representational texts highlighting that most texts in ESL textbooks lack representational texts under which he places the literary texts or texts with literary elements.

Most learners therefore are exposed to referential texts in which 'one word has one meaning, one grammatical construction is right and another wrong' (McRae, 1996, p. 17). In such a context, text is approached "efferently" which does not construct an "aesthetic interaction between the reader and the text" (McKay and Petitt, 1984, p.192) where the learner undoubtedly fails to experience a personal involvement. This lack of personal involvement might as a result inhibit the communicative impetus, motivational drive and the sense of personal growth through self-expression. McRae describes referential texts to be "purely informational" and he believes that at this communication level fluency is lost at the expense of accuracy (McRae, 1996, p.17).

Representational materials, on the other hand having literary elements push the learner to question the message, understand point of view, build hypothesis, look for evidence in the meaning construction process, interpret, make inferences, apply world knowledge and communicate their views because unlike referential materials where information and the accuracy of information transfer is paramount, in referential texts 'the rules are questioned, played around with and put to different uses...' (*ibid.)* Thus, representational texts when utilized in language teaching settings promote a different view to language where the learners go beyond the right and wrong answers to the language exercises and question what the language does and how the meaning created. McRae (1996) expounds that when the safety of referential texts are left and the learners expose themselves to areas of risks and uncertainly, "the fifth skill"; thinking in English come into play and this goes in hand with building "text awareness". What language learners get from representational texts are indeed intricately intertwined with putting the pieces together activating high-order thinking skills and thus construct meaning, form personal opinions and views due to the nature of representational texts where learners need to seek 'shades of meaning, understanding of point of view, and notions of where language is coming from. It contains elements of uncertainty and intentionality' (McRae, 1996, p. 20-21).

Literature as a Resource in ESL/EFL

Integration of literary texts in an ESL/ EFL context offers a meaningful context and non-trivial content (ibid.) which provide countless opportunities for the language learner to engage in the text on multitude different levels; cultural gain, personal growth, intellectual engagement, openness and readiness to see multiple perspectives while reserving judgment. Literature is "amongst several means of access to the foreign culture" (Littlewood, 1986, p.180). When we apply our reading or in other words as Carter and Long (1991) explains when one relates their reading to their personal experiences and evaluates the text and life 'to make the text one's own' as 'The Personal Growth Model' offers, a sense of personal growth might be accomplished (p.9). The topics and themes in literary texts instigate and foster communication where 'genuinely held ideas and views' are exchanged (Greenwood, 1989, p. 96) which most artificially crafted texts for language learning lack where there is either a right or a wrong answer and little place for creativity and imagination.

When literature is used as a resource, the change might also happen at a pedagogical level. Sinclare (1996, p.143) argues that what literary texts trigger in regards to high- order thinking and questioning skills is that they guide learners 'to make the leap from dependence to independence and to understand why it is useful'. Any change that occurs in the reader; 'some difference reached in students' perception of the language, the text, or even the world' (McRae, 1996, p. 25) might lead to independence and independence of thought. Literary texts ask for and encourage personal reactions about the issues, themes or the topic, these reactions to texts promote "learner autonomy" (Sinclare, 1996, p.140). Greenwood (1989) and Vincent (1986) add that a sense of increase in self-confidence through independence and questioning also facilitate a

sense of self-accomplishment and increase of motivation. Giving an opportunity to learners to engage in literature 'promote[s] the development of the individual as a whole person, providing access to new and different experiences, feelings, desires and creative impulses' (Sinclare, 1996, p.140-141).

METHODOLOGY

The central objective of the study is to obtain an in-depth understanding of Turkish ESL students' perceptions of studying literature. Freshman English students receiving Textual Analysis and Effective Communication lesson study two short stories grouped under a theme and a novel in a semester; therefore the in-depth analysis of their descriptions of their experiences; individuals' attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, feelings and actions call for a qualitative method.

In this qualitative study, which used purposive and convenience sampling as opposed to random sampling, the data was collected in 2016 at Istanbul Sehir University. The primary data collection method; semi-structure interviews were conducted with twelve Freshman English students who completed Textual Analysis and Effective Communication course during the fall and spring semesters. The researcher recorded and transcribed the interviews subsequently and the interviews lasted between twenty-five to thirty-five minutes. The interview included three parts, the second part of the interview whose results this paper presents comprised of questions regarding students' perceptions of the Textual Analysis and Effective Communication Course, classroom activities, text types and their personal remarks on the benefits of studying literary texts; the learning outcome.

All the twelve participants interviewed for the study were between the ages of 18-20. Except for one participant, all the participants (11 students) studied at the English Preparatory School before they passed the proficiency exam. Participants were placed in Upper Intermediate (6 students; S1, S3, S4, S7, S8, S10), Pre-Intermediate (3 students; S2, S6, S11), Elementary (1 student; S9) and Intermediate (1 student) levels when they started English Preparatory School. Six of the participants were male (S1, S4, S5, S7, S11, S12) and six of them were female (S2, S3, S6, S8, S9, S10). Ten participants out of twelve went to a state high school and only two of them (S2 and S10) went to a private high school. Four of the participants were in Law (S1, S3, S4, S7), three of them were in Islamic Studies (S5, S11, S12), two of them were in Psychology (S2, S6), one in Industrial Engineering (S8) and one in Management (S10) Departments.

In this study, a theme-centered approach or thematic analysis was chosen to be applied for data analysis. In this approach, the researcher could either prefer to take an inductive or a theory-driven approach. In the former, 'the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis' (Patton 1980:306). Thus, in this study an inductive approach was preferred to identify the patterns through thematic codes. After the researcher identified the similarities and differences in the patterns, themes or systematic categories were developed based on the meanings discovered. The themes emerged from the raw data, which initially decoded openly and then the empirical data was separated from the rest to identify both unforeseen and expected patterns. The researcher then decoded the material in order to reach the explicit content by writing small codes for sentences.

FINDINGS

Students' Perceptions of Textual Analysis Classes

Having positive attitudes result in a higher level of devotion to language learning and as a result students apply several strategies in their efforts to learn (Baker, 1993). Even though the majority of the students (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9, S10, S12) had a positive experience in Textual Analysis classes, they expressed having doubts and uncertainty about the class in the beginning. Two students (S7, S7) thought they didn't feel ready to read such literary works in English due to their weak language skills, and one (S2) mentioned how everybody in English Preparatory School reported these classes to be boring and intimidating. Fortunately, the attitudes seem to be malleable and if the causes of negative attitudes are identified and changed, there might be a shift in attitudes as well (Ghazali, 2008). The data shows that in these cases the reasons for uncertainty were students' pre-conceived beliefs. When asked about what aspects contributed to their positive experience, students 'responses varied; sharing thoughts, ideas, talking about stories' in class (S1, S3, S4, S5, S9, S10), presentations, research on background knowledge' (S2, S5, S6, S2, S10, S12) and learning about different perspectives, the world and society (S6, S8, S9, S12) but all were related to active student involvement and in-class activities. Student 9, 10 and 2 explained how they felt about sharing their views:

> We were sharing our ideas and actually not the teacher we were sharing. ...and it also encourages to think. (S9)

> We were expecting the characters are doing, this behavior and why their aims. So, I think it is, it makes us think more about the characters and focusing on the story and we started to think in English sometimes, and I think it was beneficial to think in English and speak rapidly more than we were. (S10)

> Generally, our activities were speaking time. Those activities were very effective on me because other lessons we cannot speaking or we could not speaking times because of the professors. (S2)

This result is in line with Timuçhin's study (2001) where he reports a dramatic change in Turkish EFL literature students' attitudes. This change was mainly due to 'the teaching being moved away from teacher-centeredness towards student-centeredness' with the implementation of 'an integrated approach comprising language-based approaches and pedagogical stylistics' (p. 291). Considering that unlike the participants in the aforementioned study, the students in my study are not literature students with strong motivational drives towards literature, the results are noteworthy that all twelve students expressed having a positive attitude towards the lesson.

Another interesting point made by S2 and S6 refers to literature's being multidimensional and this enabling them to see different perspectives. The following quotes are representative of how they felt about studying literary texts:

> More than just reading the novel, we also analyze the society. (S12)

> I could see that in a literature text you can also have history, philosophy and sociology, and other maybe departments, other sciences that are cumulative and going together. (S6)

> At the end of the class we present something about the novel or the stories I present the novel with the psychological perspective on the characters effective something and I enjoyed and I loved the Textual analysis classes. (S2)

Most students stated having benefited form-studying literature in having a better understanding of either society (S1, S2, S5, S6, S9, S11) or themselves (S2, S3, S4, S9, S10, S8, S12) when their personal connections to texts were questioned. Sociological and psychological analysis of various social issues and contexts led to a better understanding of the world history and politics which enabled them to see 'the system; current system, past and present' (S1), "world system, knowledge about the system" (S9) "ideology; the same ideologies" (S4), "political circumstances in Turkey and perception of the state" (S5), historical background (S6) and positioning of their own society in the bigger picture (S9, S12, S11, S8). As for 'understanding themselves', S7, S8, S12, S2, S3, S9 explained that their point of view changed, they started seeing things from a different perspective; "see the life actually in a better way" (S9). S4 stated having understood that " you have to be open-minded. Just don't stick with one idea". S9 also commented on the difference she felt between English Preparatory and Textual Classes:

> These things you know are not helping us to control ourselves, our disciplines our perspective to looking at the world... I think Textual also have to be like this I mean have to be different than from the prep school, it shouldn't be just for English, it also help us to the other lessons like society like these things.

The results show that Textual Analysis classes implementing a content-based syllabus with a focus on the literary nature of literature, provided a platform where 'the experience of engaging with literature is kept sufficiently interesting, varied and non-directive to let the reader feel that he or she is taking possession of a previously unknown territory' (Collie and Slater, 1987, p. 6). Students' comments reveal that when offered student-centered in-class activities and intellectually engaged, they are likely to get involved and participate, and enjoy and appreciate discovering unknown territories (*ibid.*), which seems to be motivational for Turkish ESL students who are the products of a teacher-centered conventional education system.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The study suggests that the integration of literature in ESL/ EFL contexts if approached in a way that it doesn't lose the literary nature of literature, it offers a platform where the students not only develop their language skills but also get a sense of accomplishment and personal growth. As Brumfit and Carter (1986, p. 111) posits 'adequate teaching of a literary text goes beyond language teaching techniques and if its commonly accepted traditional use for 'teaching usage which "involves a knowledge of linguistic rules" 'is abandoned (Widdowson 1979:3), the integration of literature could empower a multidimensional perspectives. Thus, non-trivial content foster an intellectual engagement in the material being thought and as in this study the Freshman English students reported this unique aspect of literature has enabled them to be

exposed to different perspectives, viewpoints and a different outlook on life regarding social, psychological, philosophical, societal and ideological aspects which most ESL materials lack.

The study also reveals that students 'learn to recognize that literary works deal with real, relevant issues that they themselves can and do write about' (Spack 1985:714) and the engagement in this non-trivial content in return trigger personal connections and real-life like discussions and debates which foster communicative competence and as the results show students willingly voice their opinions and want to put forth their ideas and/or beliefs on the subject matter. Students expressed to have taken great pleasure in participating in the discussions and debates and taking possession of their own learning and were thankful to be given that opportunity.

It seems that accepting the common presumption that literature or representational materials are too challenging for ESL students to handle seem to deprive them of crucial benefits such as approaching the language as a socio-semantic system which provides personal, communicative gains and empowers a multidimensional perspective regards to the issues, themes and topics at hand. It might serve as a tool to transform the idea of 'language learning' to be the application of rules and offers multiplicity of perspectives and an engagement in real or real-life like issues, where 'the language learning process begins to become more than an exercise in learning and applying rules' (McRae 1996: 18) and leads to a sense of personal accomplishment.

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